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SOVEREIGNTY AND FREEDOM: A REPLY TO ROWE

Hugh J. McCann

I have defended the view that God's complete sovereignty over the universe, which requires that he be creatively responsible for our decisions, is compatible with libertarian free will. William Rowe interprets me as holding that this is entirely owing to God's being timelessly eternal, and argues that God's decisions as creator would still be determining in a way that destroys freedom. His argument overlooks an important part of my view—an account of creation according to which God's will as creator does not stand as an independent determining condition of our own. I try here to clarify that account, and to show that Rowe's criticisms leave it untouched.

In an earlier article I defended the thesis that God can have complete sovereignty over the universe despite the fact the humans exercise libertarian freedom.¹ Our decisions and actions are free, I argued, even though their existence is owing directly to God's creative fiat, because God's action as creator does not constitute an independent determining condition of what we do. In "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,"² William Rowe raises some objections that bring into focus the issues surrounding this view. I think his criticisms leave my main argument intact, but they offer the opportunity for some clarifications I hope will advance the debate.

The position I defend offers several advantages. For the libertarian, it solves the otherwise intractable problem of bringing free will under the principle of sufficient reason. Our own reasons for acting as we do are incomplete; but God's will that we so act is part of his total will for the world, in which all is ordained to perfect goodness. For biblical exegesis, it allows a natural reading of passages like Romans 9:15-20 and Philippians 2:12-13, where St. Paul seems clearly to hold both that our behavior is directed by God and that we are fully responsible for it. And for natural theology, this view secures the God's complete sovereignty in human affairs. His providential love is expressed fully and without frustration in all that we do, and his omniscience as creator is secure against any defect owing to our freedom, since our actions are known to him through his own will as to what they will be. But of course the whole thing fails if God's sovereignty and our freedom cannot be reconciled. And although there is ample precedent for the claim that they can, including the Westminster Confession which Rowe cites,³ there are also reasons for doubt. One on



which Rowe and I agree concerns whether, on this view, God becomes the "author of sin." He does not, if by that is meant that our sinful actions count also as sins or evil doing on God's part. Our actions are still predicated of us on this view, so any sin that they constitute is still ours. God is, of course, responsible for willing that our sinful actions occur, but that is not a problem peculiar to the position I defend. The same is true on any theory that has God knowing, as creator, what world he is creating. And since God's purposes in willing that we commit acts which are sinful need not be the same as our purposes in sinning, he may well have good reasons for creating a sinful world.

Rowe and I disagree on a second and more challenging problem: namely, whether the reconciliation can be effected at all. The key issue here is whether it is possible for God's will as creator to be determinative of my decisions, and yet that those decisions be up to me. If the appeal to God's will as creator is to provide a sufficient reason for my decisions being as they are, then God's will has to settle things: my deciding as I do must in some way be owing to the vision of perfect good brought to pass by God in creation. But if this is so, then how can my decisions possibly be up to me? That would seem impossible, especially if we think of God as being like us: an agent who exists in time, and whose will for his creatures is achieved by issuing commands, which in turn cause us to behave as we do. For suppose I decide to vacation in Colorado next summer. On this account, my decision will have been caused by a separate act on God's part—a command, which may very well have occurred long before I was born. And then I seem to be no more free, in the libertarian sense, then I would be if my decision were the result of natural causation.

Against this type of objection I had argued, in part, that God is not a temporal being, so that the creative act on his part that provides for the existence of my decisions and actions does not antedate them. Rather, my decisions and actions are willed by God in the single creative act by which, as I understand things, he puts in place the entire universe, in all of its history (p. 591). But that is not all. The consideration of eternity was part of a larger argument that God's action as creator is not a distinct event from our own exercises of will. Instead, I suggested, the relation of creature to creator is analogous to that between the content of our own acts of will and the acts themselves. And I urged that this relation is such that I can have libertarian freedom, even though the existence of my decisions and actions is directly owing to the exercise of God's will. More on this below, but first I want to address further the issue of eternity, about which Rowe expresses misgivings. His concerns are two: whether there can be decisions (on God's part) that occur at no time whatever, and how timeless decisions can "determine" decisions that occur in time.⁴

On the first score, God's role as creator does require that he act, and since that act belongs to his will it is intention generating. So God does, in creating the world, decide that it shall be what it is, in every detail. But that does not require that God, or any act of decision on his part, be "in time." For time cannot exist except as an aspect of change, and God does not change. He is eternally engaged in a single act in which all is decided, simply because in that act all of creation is both placed in being and held

there through his knowing will. I suspect that there is no legitimate sense in which this sort of "deciding" even could have temporal features, but in any case it does not require them. As for whether God's creative activity could be responsible for the existence of things "in time," I see no difficulty. It would indeed be difficult for a timeless God to create temporal things if time were as I think many imagine it to be: a sort of pre-existing vessel, "out there," that God must endeavor to fill up with temporal beings and their behavior. That would be as though a novelist were presented with a separate "narrative time," existing prior to any creative activity on her part, and had somehow to create her characters so they would exist inside it. I cannot imagine how such a feat could be accomplished. But that is not what the novelist does. She creates her own narrative time, and she does so simply by creating characters and other entities that *change*. Nothing more is needed, because time is nothing apart from change. And so it is with God: by making us creatures who change—who begin and cease to act, and who interact with other creatures—he creates us in time, simply because to create such creatures *is* to create time itself.⁵ There is no reason why this could not be done by a timeless being. Indeed, it is just as pointless to think of God's activity as creator as occurring in temporal relations with our own acts, as it would be to think a novelist's creative actions bear temporal relations to those of her characters.

But placing God's activity as creator outside time is not alone sufficient to secure human freedom. There is still the matter of determination to consider, and here Rowe sees the problem of sovereignty reemerging. For if I only decide what God timelessly wills that I decide, and if it is truly up to me what I decide, then in deciding to vacation in Colorado I must in fact be determining what God's will regarding my decision is to be, rather than the other way around. But this seems clearly to impugn God's sovereignty, which Rowe rightly predicts would be unacceptable to my position.⁶ Worse yet, if I do have this kind of authority over God's will, then his will cannot be a refuge against the objection that libertarian freedom violates the principle of sufficient reason. For now we are back in a position where my decision determines all, even God's will. And if that is so, then the shortcomings of my own reasons for deciding to vacation in Colorado will extend also to God's willing that I so decide.⁷

This second problem is dependent on the first: only if we claim libertarian freedom requires that God's will be dependent on ours are we committed to explaining his decisions in terms of our reasons. I am committed to no such hopeless project. I hold that we and all of our actions depend upon God for their existence, not vice versa, so that the perfect good for which he creates the world counts as the full and final explanation for what we do. This can be true only if all that we do is finally "up to God." The question is just whether this state of things entails that our actions are not "up to us," in the sense libertarian freedom requires. Rowe thinks it does. If I understand him correctly, he believes that one person's will can be fully efficacious with respect to another's only if the freedom of the other is destroyed. This, however, is not obvious when it comes to the relationship between creator and creature. Certainly, at least, the mere logic of the relationship, which is what Rowe appeals to,⁸ is not sufficient to secure such a result. To be sure,

given the usual list of God's powers, if he wills that I decide to vacation in Colorado, we may safely infer that I shall so decide. But the mere availability of the inference does not destroy my freedom. After all, on most accounts of God's relationship to the world the reverse inference holds as well. If he is omniscient, any decision of mine must be something God has willed, simply by choosing to create this world rather than some other. But although he seems willing to play either side of this equivalence, even Rowe does not claim God and I are slaves of each other. Logical "determination" alone, then, will not suffice. There has to be some problem about the relationship I postulated between the events themselves—that is, between God's willing and mine—that Rowe sees as destroying my freedom. This problem cannot be a matter of logic, since logical relations do not hold among events. Rowe does not say what the problem is, nor does he address what I have to say about human agency, and the relationship between God's will and ours. Clearly, however, he was not convinced. Let me, therefore, try to state more clearly why I think our choices can owe their existence to God's creative will, while our freedom is left intact.

In part, the issue has to do with what is essential to human agency. Libertarians are prone to think of agency as a power by which we confer existence on our own actions. But that cannot be right. If I confer existence on my act of deciding to vacation in Colorado, I must do so either through some separate act, or as an aspect of the very act of deciding. If a separate act serves as my means then that act, rather than my decision, becomes the focus of our concerns about agency and freedom, and we are headed for a vicious regress. But neither can I confer existence on my act of deciding as an aspect of the act itself. For prior to the act's appearance there is nothing to do the conferring, and after it appears the conferral is unnecessary. An action can ground an account of its own existence only if existence is an essential feature of it, and no act—or at least none of ours—exists necessarily. So whatever agency is, it is not a power of conferring existence on our decisions and actions. I held that there are two things essential to agency (pp. 590-91). The first is intrinsic intentionality, which in decision making is manifested by the fact that we cannot decide accidentally. Rather, when we decide we *mean* to decide, and to decide exactly as we do. The second essential feature is voluntariness. This is the "up to us" aspect: the fact that when we make decisions, we feel we are a genuine source of control and spontaneity in the universe. When I decide to vacation in Colorado, I see myself as rising above the order of natural causation, and as settling through my very act of deciding both whether I shall decide, and what the content of my decision shall be.⁹

Consider now the relationship between our decisions and actions and God's will as creator. Given that we cannot confer existence on our actions, we are left with just three alternatives. The first is that the existence of our decisions and actions has no accounting *whatever*. If that is so, then determinist complaints about the unintelligibility of free will are reinstated. In addition, God's sovereignty is irretrievably compromised, and his omniscience called into question. If there is no explanation whatever for the occurrence of our decisions and actions, any claim that God could know as creator what world he is creating is entirely arbitrary. The second

alternative is the one determinists prefer: that our decisions and actions are after all the outcome of natural processes, to be explained by the causal operation of our motives and beliefs. This secures God's sovereignty and omniscience, since as creator he is responsible for the existence of natural processes. But it does so only at the expense of giving up libertarianism, and the theological benefits it has to offer. In particular, we could not claim that the occurrence of sin in the world has anything to do with the moral authenticity of free agents. The third and, I think, only acceptable alternative is that the existence of our decisions and actions has the same explanation as our own existence: it is to be accounted for in terms of the free, creative activity of God himself.

Here too, however, there is a mistake to be avoided. We tend to think of God as effecting changes in the world in the same way we do when we perform volitional movements. That is, we imagine that he issues a kind of command, which then produces via event causation the mandated effect. But this cannot be right either. The very idea of a causal nexus is highly suspect,¹⁰ but there is certainly none that joins God's will to the world. If there were, God would have had to create it. On the present model, that would require another process of command and causation, and we would again be facing a regress. The only way to escape the regress is to hold that God directly creates whatever we take the causal nexus to be. But if God's creative will can be directly efficacious in this task, then it can also be so in his creation of us and our actions. There is, then, no nexus here, nor is there any causal distance between God and either us or our behavior. Rather, we and all that we do have our being *in* God, and the *first* manifestation of God's creative will regarding our decisions and actions is nothing short of the acts themselves.

The parallel I tried to draw between our own willing and God's (pp. 590-91) was meant to illustrate the intimacy of this relationship. When I decide to vacation in Colorado, the direct product of my will is my decision—that is, the thought that reflects the commitment thereby formed. But there is not one entity which is my deciding and another which is the decision. Rather, my thought comes *in the mode* of deciding, so that the first product of my will just *is* the thought which expresses my commitment. I think: I shall vacation in Colorado this year. Our relationship to God is analogous. As our thoughts have their being in us, so we and our decisions and actions have their being in him, his creative will consisting simply in lovingly giving himself over to being the source of existence for all that is. And as with our decisions, there is not one event which is God's act of providing for our existence and another which is our existing. The two constitute the same ontological reality, differently and equally accurately described. If this seems obscure, consider again the relationship between the author and her characters. Their first existence is, of course, in her thoughts. But there is no independent mental act of the author that gives rise to her characters; they are born with the very thoughts themselves in which she first conceives them. The same holds of us in our dependence on God for our existence, and it holds of our decisions also. Thus, the first manifestation of God's will in creating me the person who decides to vacation in Colorado is not an event independent of my decision, but simply my deciding to go there.

Because this is so, my decision can owe its existence to the creative will of God, while at the same time being completely free in the libertarian sense. It does not, of course, result from secondary causes, hence I do indeed transcend the natural causal order in making it. And because my decision is the first manifestation of God's will in creating me the person who decides as I do, his will does not stand as an *independent* determining factor in my decision's occurrence. True, I cannot decide in opposition to God's will—and since he is the foundation of my being, not I of his, his will is in that sense determining. But if, in all of my decisions, the first manifestation of God's will is simply my deciding as I do, then as far as the actual events go all the determination comes to is that neither God nor I can will as we do and yet be willing something else. My freedom is in no way curtailed. I am not acted upon, nor is there in the world or anywhere else any event or set of conditions apart from my decision that compels it. On the contrary, my decision to vacation in Colorado remains exactly what it is: a decision. It is still intrinsically intentional, as all decisions must be, and it is still an exercise of complete spontaneity and control: it is the sole event through which its own timing and content are settled, and it is predicated solely of me. God's agency is, of course, involved in its occurrence, for he alone is responsible for the existence of things. But the operation of his creative activity is such that my freedom is untouched. Thus, while what I decide is completely up to God as creator, it is completely up to me as agent.

If this is correct, then contrary to the grievously picturesque image Rowe draws from Reid, no one's hook is in anyone's nose. My hook is not in God's nose, for he is the creator of heaven and earth, including me and my actions. And his hook is not in my nose because he is very good at creating, and hence well able to give existence to agents who freely and voluntarily do all that is required for a world that perfectly reflects his goodness. That we should find this suggestion difficult is, I think, most likely owing to either of two misapprehensions. The first is the supposition that in order to be free, we must somehow confer existence on our own actions. That would be impossible in any case, as we have seen, but it is not required for free will. Libertarian freedom demands only that there be no independent determining conditions for our deeds, and that we be fully active in their performance, in the way voluntary intentionality requires. If the relation between God's will and ours is as I have described it, then both these requirements are satisfied even though we act only as God wills.

The second source of misgiving is a suspicion that our actions cannot be subject to God's will without our being manipulated by God in the interest of ends of which we know little or nothing, and which need not include our own final good. But this too is a false supposition. It is true that in acting as we do we may serve ends we comprehend poorly if at all, and if orthodox belief is correct it is also true that in serving them we ourselves may be lost. But it hardly follows that we are manipulated. Manipulation requires that our decisions not be authentically our own, that they be subordinated to some movement of God's will that is independent of our deciding, and provides for us a moral character that is ontologically prior to anything we do. Nothing in the view I have set forth requires that this be the case. On the contrary: if God's love for each of us is complete, then even though our

actions may serve additional ends, none of those ends will be more important to him than the destiny that accrues to each of us through our deeds. The perfection of creation is no doubt such that in all we do, our actions engage perfectly with the rest of the universe, so that a perfect result is achieved. But that does not prevent God's seeing to it that the actions of each of us—even the lost, if such there be—define an authentic destiny. Bad authors manipulate their characters; good ones don't have to.

I would be a good deal less than ingenuous to claim everything I have said here is implicit in the paper Rowe criticizes, and I have to thank him for providing an occasion for me to expand on the relation between our own agency and God's. I hope I have done so in a way to make the case more convincing. What is most important, however, is a rather minimal claim: the mere fact that God's will and mine are so related that each can be inferred from the other does not destroy my freedom. Its destruction would require not a logical relationship between propositions, but an ontological one between the corresponding events, such that I am rendered passive in my decisions and actions. Then, I would cease to be a source of novelty in the world, and cease to function as a voluntary agent in the formation of my own moral character. Rowe's criticisms do not seem to me sufficient to establish such a result.

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NOTES

1. "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 582-598. Page references in the text are to this source.

2. William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 98-101.

3. I had cited Aquinas, who is also committed to this position. See, for example, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III, Ch. 88. Brian J. Shanley, O.P., "Divine Causation and Human Freedom in Aquinas," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 99-122 gives a very helpful discussion of Aquinas's view.

4. "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," p. 100.

2. The analogy between creation and authorship has been developed by others. See, for example, Katherin Rogers, *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), chapter 13.

6. "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," p. 100.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

4. For more on the nature of agency, see my *The Works of Agency* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), chapter 9.

5. See Jonathan Kvanvig's and my, "The Occasionalist Proselytizer: A Modified Catechism," in J.E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing, 1991): pp. 587-615.